

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENNA 000945

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/AGS (VIKMANIS-KELLER) AND INR/EU

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [AU](#)

SUBJECT: FREEDOM PARTY CRISIS HEADING FOR APRIL SHOWDOWN

REFS: A) VIENNA 738 B) VIENNA 739

This message is sensitive but unclassified.

[11.](#) (SBU) The Freedom Party's leadership crisis continues unabated. On March 9, in an apparent damage-containment exercise, the party leadership announced a move to "re-brand" the Freedom Party (FPO) at a special convention on April 23. Meanwhile, Carinthian Governor Joerg Haider has alternately pondered founding a new party or taking the party leadership himself. But Haider now faces a vocal right-wing faction that favors Vienna state FPO chairman Heinz Christian Strache as party chair. In an effort to muzzle internal critics, the Carinthian state chapter expelled the FPO's sole Member of the European Parliament, Andreas Moelzer. The intra-party turmoil is fueling media speculation that Chancellor Schuessel, who heads the Freedom Party's coalition partner, the People's Party (OVP) might once again have to call early elections. However, the FPO leadership, including Haider, has stressed that it wants to continue the coalition until 2006. End summary.

FPO Leadership seeks re-launch of party April 23

[12.](#) (SBU) On March 9, in reaction to stinging defeats in local elections in Lower Austria (ref a) and Styria, FPO party chairperson Ursula Haubner, Federal Vice Chancellor Hubert Gorbach, Carinthian Governor Joerg Haider and parliamentary caucus leader Herbert Scheibner announced a bid to unify and consolidate the party and win back former FPO voters. To flesh out this re-branding strategy, the party leadership tasked Scheibner with drafting a new platform. This would include strategies to create employment (especially for women and young adults), address "the threat from globalization" and reach out to small and medium-sized businesses. Scheibner and his colleagues emphasized the FPO was "100 percent committed to implementing the coalition agreement with the OVP until the end of the legislative term in 2006" (ref b).

Haider to return as national FPO chairman?

[13.](#) (SBU) The March 9 announcement appeared to defuse Haider's statement of a few days earlier that he would leave the FPO to found a new party. However, Haider said he would retain this option in case delegates at an extraordinary convention on April 23 decline to give him carte blanche to reorganize the party from top to bottom. Among other things, Haider wants the right to depose leaders of state branches. Haider is demanding a two-thirds majority at the convention for his new course and his new mandate. In a radio interview on March 12, Haider hinted that he would again seek the national chairmanship -- which would mean that his sister, Haubner, would have to move aside.

[14.](#) (SBU) However, Haider's latest bid for leadership did not elicit the usual rush of support from the FPO faithful. Instead, it mobilized the party's right wing, which openly challenged Haider's claim to the post. Haider's demand for sweeping powers to purge the party was particularly controversial, with even some of his closest followers showing a lack of enthusiasm. Four of the nine state parties (Vienna, Lower Austria, Salzburg, Tyrol) rejected Haider's plan, while five others offered varying degrees of support. With the Carinthian and Vienna chapters as the two largest, this represents a split almost down the middle.

Expulsion of party critic Moelzer

[15.](#) (SBU) The intra-party rift widened on March 16 when the Carinthian state party expelled its most notorious right-winger, Member of the European Parliament Andreas Moelzer. The motion cited "repeated behavior damaging to the party" and "actions directed against Carinthian Governor Joerg Haider." Haubner said the national FPO

would follow suit. Moelzer's sin was to have authored an article in his weekly "Zur Zeit," in which he bluntly analyzed the shortcomings of the FPÖ leadership and the pitiful state of the party. Moelzer plans a legal challenge to the expulsion. FPÖ right-wingers are mobilizing around him.

Youthful Challenger from Vienna

16. (SBU) Haider's critics within the FPÖ are coalescing around Heinz Christian Strache, the eloquent, youthful head of the Vienna state FPÖ. Strache is part of a triumvirate of FPÖ hardliners which includes Moelzer, as well as the former FPÖ parliamentary caucus chief and current head of the FPÖ academy, Ewald Stadler. Strache, another possible contender for the party chairmanship, has been sharpening his political profile in the year since taking over the Vienna party with a law-and-order campaign tinged with anti-immigrant overtones. Strache has openly expressed interest in becoming party chair, but has also met Haider twice recently to seek a way out of the current impasse.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: The turbulence in the FPÖ represents a bitter, soul-searching battle over personalities and strategies. It has fueled media speculation that Chancellor Schuessel will again have to call early elections. Party moderates (the national leadership, plus Haider) advocate continued participation in the federal coalition, and point to Haider's reelection as governor one year ago as proof the FPÖ can thrive in government. An ideological camp led by hardliners Moelzer, Strache, and Stadler advocates a switch into opposition as the formula for the FPÖ's salvation. The April 23 convention is shaping up as a leadership struggle between Haider and Strache -- with Haubner largely forgotten in the melee. The Haider camp seems intent on weaning Strache away from his right-wing allies, but it is not clear what they can offer Strache short of the chairmanship. If the party splits, new elections by fall 2005 become more likely. However, if the present party leadership (reinforced by the rebranded Haider) win out, remaining in the coalition with Schuessel will be the FPÖ's top priority.

BROWN